

Chapter 34 - (2006/7)

He shall renew your Youth Like the Eagle

On our return from Australia in May 2006, I found that the sun and exercise I had enjoyed there had given me a new energy. I considered a project that, even in my better years I would have been hesitant to attack. Our back garden had been a bugbear for a long time. I had dug it all up, had sown lots of grass seed but all to no avail – it was still a mess! I decided to build a patio so we could enjoy the access we now had through our bedroom balcony and steps. A cement slab 12' x 12', stenciled with a decorative pattern, would be built where we could place our garden furniture and sit to enjoy summer evenings and outdoor meals. It would be surrounded by a nice seat on two sides, backed with trellis work where flowers could grow. I would then develop a garden bed on two sides, containing many perennial plants and decorated with cedar mulch. Further a nice wide path would be built to replace the old stones that presently formed the narrow way to the rotating clothes line and the back door. This would also have the same stenciled pattern as the patio surface. Finally, I would repair our garden shed with a new plywood roof covered with shingles.

The work began slowly with the purchase of several bags of cement and two cubic yards of gravel - stone & sand mix. In all, I ended up carrying over six yards of gravel from where it was dumped to the working site, in dozens of barrow loads. A neighbour loaned me his cement mixer and, each day, I would spend a couple of hours working on my project. To my amazement, my energy did not seem to wane, and soon I was working several hours each day, taking care not to overdo it at any one time. Slowly the patio was taking shape and by the end of summer we were able to enjoy our garden. Though it would be a couple more years before we saw the garden fully in bloom, I experienced a great fulfillment in doing this work. For one whose life work has mainly been academic or social, there is always immense pleasure when he completes something more practical.

In August of 2006 I received an interesting phone call. The caller started by saying, "Pastor Gareth, we are looking for a new pastor" to which I was quick to reply, "No, thank you!" He then went on to say that Departure Bay Baptist Church of Nanaimo, BC, about 100 km north of Victoria, was seeking a new pastor and wondered if I would be interested in looking after them as interim pastor in the meantime. After some consideration and meeting with the deacons, I agreed to do so on a part time basis. This would involve being in Nanaimo, staying at our daughter's home from Thursday evening until Sunday afternoon, preaching and visiting congregation members. This was to be for four months until the end of December, but then I was persuaded to stay longer until the end of March when we were scheduled to visit friends and family in Wales.

As I had not received regular income since leaving Victoria Alliance Church at the end of 1990, it was a pleasant feeling to be the recipient of a pay cheque each month. One must add that the Lord was always faithful during those times and we were never left without knowing His abundant provisions.

One of the special things we did during those months was to form a small choir to present a Christmas cantata. We worked on John Peterson's *Night of Miracle*, one that I had sung with Louise Griesen and her Chinese choir in Hong Kong so many years before. Everyone was pleasantly surprised at the wonderful evening presentation just before Christmas.

At the beginning of my involvement with DBBC, as it was known, I made it clear I did not want to be involved with any internal politicking, but by the end of December it became apparent that there were major log jams in the church that needed to be addressed if the church was to go forward. Therefore in January I began to attend the board meetings to advise them how to work with integrity through their difficulties.

The seven months in Nanaimo were a great blessing to us – and, I hope, to the members of that church. We were able to spend good time with Corinne and Terry each week and made some wonderful life-long friendships. When we left in April, the church appointed a former pastor to become their senior pastor once more – and I had the privilege of inducting him to the work of that church.

At the beginning of March I received a letter from the local Welsh Society in Victoria. They wanted me to be the guest speaker at their St David's Day dinner. St David is the patron saint of Wales and we celebrate his day each March 1st. Many there knew me and I had many friends in that society as, upon my arrival in Victoria in 1984, I had started a St David's day service in my church, to which Welsh people came, some from as far away as Seattle and Vancouver. This idea had come to me, as I had been invited to speak at the St David's day service in the Alliance church of Windsor, Ontario, each of the previous three years. Then the society had held their business meetings in my church for a number of years before my leaving in 1990. I knew the dinner would be a secular event but I decided to speak about the Lord's amazing leading in my life, from being a schoolboy in Cowbridge to traveling and speaking in many countries of the world. I was amazed as the men who led the evening, all brought something about the Lord and spoke highly of the godly heritage we have as Welshmen. They spoke of hymnwriters and quoted the wonderful hymns that have helped to mould the people of the country, hymns still sung at major events, especially rugby games! After my speech several of the ladies came up to me to tell of times when they were young girls attending the various chapels of our homeland.

In April we left for the UK. It had been five years since last we had seen our many friends in Britain, but there was a special reason for this trip, kept secret from Anne's sister Betty who would be celebrating her eightieth birthday while we there. We spent the first week with Anne's cousins in Essex and Hampshire, making covert telephone calls to Betty's daughter Karys who was planning a very special time for her mother. Betty's birthday was on a beautiful Sunday, nice enough for her to be entertaining some friends in the back garden when we arrived about 4pm. Karys had left her cell phone in the front hallway, so having retrieved it, Anne made a telephone call to Betty right on 4 o' clock. It was Anne's custom to call Betty from Canada at 8am Pacific Time, 4pm GMT, so Betty was expecting a call from Canada on this her birthday. After the initial comments about how nice the weather was (in both places!), imagine Betty's surprise as her sister walked around the corner of the house. "How did you get here?" she queried, still holding the phone to her ear! We had a wonderful time that day and during the following week. On the Saturday, we were all taken in a limousine to a secret destination for dinner. What a thrill to find over eighty of Betty's family and friends gathered to honour her at a local golf club where we enjoyed a dinner of Welsh lamb and were entertained by a Welsh male voice choir. Just four weeks later, after our return to Canada, Betty suddenly passed into the presence of her Lord, having just completed a telephone call to a friend and without any pain. She had suffered for many years with a major hole in the heart so had enjoyed an extended lease on life until the Lord said it was time to go.

I only had a few opportunities for ministry while in UK but we enjoyed a wonderful time making use of the cheap air fares available over Europe. For 10 Euros we were able to fly to Stockholm to see Lars and Marion Friedner and their family, friends of ours since our days in Germany. Then on to Portugal where we visited our Brazilian 'daughter' Elzeny for a weekend before taking her for a week to the Algarve where we had a unit given for our pleasure by Keith Thompson, my anesthesiologist friend from the Anastasis. Then a flight to Brussels to visit Karen and Claude Agostini, and a bus to Dortmund for a week with the Beckers whom we first knew while I served with the British Forces back in the 60's. Oh, how I enjoyed the walks and talks with my friend Ulrich. I spoke at the little Brethren assembly in Neheim and reminisced over the bratwurst *mit curry* I still so much enjoyed. Little did we know forty years before, how much we would grow to love this family as if they were our own. Frau Becker had had a major stroke some time before so I wondered if she would recognize us when we visited her. I found her memory undiminished for, as we walked into her room, her eyes lit up and she could not stop kissing my hand as she held it to her mouth with her one good arm. We stayed there with her for two hours, the whole family singing the hymns that she loved so much. More meetings with other friends in England and Wales left us with a very satisfying feeling as we returned home to Canada two weeks later.

I often sit and reminisce about the wonderful paths along which the Lord has led us – and the many wonderful friends we have made along the way. To visit some of them as we did on this trip to Europe, is one of our greatest delights.